

18. HOVERING: AN UNRECORDED BEHAVIOUR IN THE INDIAN CUCKOO *CUCULUS MICROPTERUS*

The Indian cuckoo *Cuculus micropterus* is one of the most commonly heard cuckoos of Assam. During a survey of the state in April 1988 they were found to be very vocal at Kaziranga National Park, Manas, Orang, Pabitora, Laokhowa, Barnadi and Sonai-Rupai Wildlife Sanctuaries.

An unusual foraging behaviour of the bird was seen near Manas on the morning of 14 May 1988. In a thatch field of Fatemabad tea-estate at Basbari (91° E, 26° 39' N) bordering the sanctuary, we noticed an adult Indian cuckoo descend from a tree to a shrub (c. 1 m high) growing among much shorter grass. It soon took off and began hovering against moderate wind at about 1.5 m above ground. Although it was a bit clumsy it could hover at one spot for 5 to 10 seconds. It slowly flapped the upraised wings and occasionally fanned out the tail for balance, sailing from one spot to another to

hover, again taking advantage of the wind. Every now and then it descended to catch insects from short grass and returned to its low perch to feed. There was a considerable increase in insect population, specially of the grasshoppers, in the grassland after a few showers at that time. The black drongos *Dicrurus adsimilis* were seen competing with the cuckoo for insects.

Ali and Ripley (HANDBOOK OF THE BIRDS OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN, 1983) have mentioned that this chiefly arboreal cuckoo sometimes descends to the ground and hops about awkwardly to pick insects from among litter leaves. There is no mention of hovering by this or other cuckoos.

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August 30, 1989

19. EARTHWORMS IN THE DIETARY OF THE WHITEBREASTED KINGFISHER *HALCYON SMYRNENSIS* (LINN.)

Following up A.K. Mukherjee's observation on the diet of the whitebreasted kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis* in the Sunderbans (*JBNHS* 72(2): 418-22), an individual was observed on the Aligarh University Campus on 15 September 1989 in cloudy weather pouncing on an earthworm from its perch c. 8 m up. It picked up the earthworm and swallowed it squatting on the ground. On finishing, it flew up to a telegraph wire, and thence flew down again for a second earthworm and swallowed it. The bird dived for the third time and carried off to its perch a fattish looking earthworm

again, and having battered it on the perch, swallowed it entire. Almost the same way, the same bird was found feeding on earthworms the next morning.

Although earthworms in the diet of the bird is not mentioned anywhere else in literature except by Mukherjee (loc. cit.) it appears that earthworm eating is not restricted to Sundarbans kingfishers alone.

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September 30, 1989

20. DRINKING AND BATHING BEHAVIOUR OF THE LARGE GREEN *MEGALAIMA ZEYLANICA* (GMELIN) AND THE SMALL GREEN *M. VIRIDIS* (BODDAERT) BARBETS

While carrying out observations on the comparative ecology and biology of barbets (*Megalaima* spp.) I have, on various occasions, recorded them drinking and bathing. Though the other habits of barbets have been published earlier, as far as I am aware this behaviour is unrecorded.

Any open natural rain-filled tree hole serves as a drinking and bathing 'pool' for the birds. On no occasion were the birds seen landing on the ground for this purpose. In this sense they are completely arboreal.

During the dry months no drinking and bathing was observed.

The bird perches at the edge of the hole and dips the beak into the water and raises it, repeating this process several times to quench its thirst. Drinking mostly lasts for 15 to 35 seconds. The duration of bathing depends on whether the bird is single or in a group: when single, as long as 11 minutes; and when in a group (normally consisting of 3-5 birds) mostly for 2-3 minutes. Since the 'pool' is always small, one bird